

Context and implications document for: Parents, individualism and education: three paradigms and four countries

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Author’s introduction

Common explanations of the global expansion of education are a good fit with one of three paradigms: neoinstitutionalism, political economy, or functionalism. This article puts them to the test by analysing the internal logic, contradictions and predictions of each paradigm in three areas: parental influences on children’s experiences of education (broadly defined), the meaning and role of the notion of individualism, and the underlying changes in society of which educational expansion is an expression. We then test each paradigm with empirical evidence on parental influences from four countries around the world. We conclude that, while the most promising research has been conducted within the political economy paradigm, developing a nuanced understanding of individualism is crucial to our understanding of the role of parents in global educational expansion.

Implications for theory

The neoinstitutionalist paradigm struggles to understand why parenting should play a role in the global expansion of education. The influence of the family is meant to fade away with institutional isomorphism and the relentless rise of individualism. The

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[Corrections made on 29 May 2020 after first online publication: The second author’s name has been corrected from ‘Maria Isabel Gonçalves Guedes De Castro Guimarães’ to ‘Isabel Guimarães’ and the third author’s name has been corrected from ‘Wei Zhou’ to ‘Wei Zhao’ in this version]

neoinstitutionalist conception of individualism also hampers any attempt to explain variations in international experience. The political economy paradigm is better equipped to acknowledge differences between superficially similar countries. The most promising approaches trace these differences to the actions of classes, governments and social movements within these countries. A political economy which identifies more than one type of individualism, and the importance of social movements to these types, may be of further help in explaining dynamic international differences in parental influence. The functionalist paradigm struggles to accommodate international differences in the way that conjugal families socialise children for places in the occupational order. Thus, the accounts given of parental influence in Singapore seem to be illegitimate within the functionalist paradigm. Moreover, attempts to adapt the functionalist paradigm to evidence of international differences threaten its foundations by denying that variations in parental influence are ultimately determined by the degree of complexity of the division of labour.

Implications for research

Potentially fruitful lines for research on the importance of social movements to international differences in parental influences include the significance of the American counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s on parental attitudes towards individualism and education. In Portugal, there is a need for research on the connection between the strong sentimental individualism uncovered in our research and the social movements following the Carnation revolution, and also those involving resistance to neoliberalism, especially after the elections of 2011. We already have research on their effect within the Portuguese education system, but we need to know whether there was a similar effect within families, leading to the emphasis on sentimental individualism evident in the parenting recalled by Portuguese graduates. Our research also suggests that the lack of a history of social movements might help to explain why parents in Singapore were not very concerned with sentimental individualism, and the same theory might usefully be applied to China. In Singapore and China, we may be witnessing a natural experiment in the substitution of state action, and particularly market action, to make up for the effects of absent social movements. We will need research to discover the results of this synthetic method of stimulating sentimental individualism.

Resources for teaching & learning in higher education

Author Recommends

- 1 Carney, Stephen, Jeremy Rappleye, and Iveta Silova. 2012. "Between Faith and Science: World Culture Theory and Comparative Education." *Comparative Education Review* 56(3):366-93. *[A critique of the neoinstitutional account of the global expansion of education from the point of view of political economy. The authors argue that, while examples of local divergence from world culture leave the neoinstitutional paradigm intact, the real weaknesses of the model lie in its ideological foundations and normative prescriptions.]*

- 2 Fevre, Ralph. 2016. *Individualism and Inequality: The Future of Work and Politics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. [This book, written by one of the authors of this article, explains how two different types of individualism were inextricably linked with key developments in the history of educational expansion in the UK and the US. It argues that every attempt to embed an early moral individualism, powered by social movements, in education systems eventually led to increased social inequality. Thus, moral individualism gave birth, over decades of economic change and class struggle, to the competitive, neoliberal individualism which spread around the world as education expanded.]
- 3 Kremer-Sadlik, Tamar and Marilena Fatigante. 2015. "Investing in Children's Future: Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Ideologies on Parental Involvement in Education." *Childhood* 22(1):67–84. [A report of two ethnographic studies in the US and Italy which found parental influences on children's education varied widely between the two countries, with Italian parents allowing their children more freedom and autonomy. These differences were closely related to further differences in culture and institutions, especially in the two education systems.]
- 4 Meyer, John W. 1987. "Self and Life Course: Institutionalization and its Effects." Pp. 242–60 in *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society and the Individual* by G. M. Thomas, J. W. Meyer, F. O. Ramirez and J. Boli. Newbury Park: Sage. [John Meyer's most comprehensive treatment of the two dimensions of individualism – the self and the life course – which he thinks the neoinstitutional paradigm requires. He argues that only this paradigm can explain some otherwise intractable conundrums which arise from the inescapable divergence between the subjective view of self and human experience.]
- 5 Ochs, Elinor and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik. 2015. "How Postindustrial Families Talk." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44:87–103. [A comprehensive review of anthropologies of the postindustrial middle-class families across the world. The review is firmly situated within the political economy paradigm and has a central focus on individualism.]
- 6 Parsons, Talcott. [1951]1991. *The Social System*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. [A key, and monumental, work in the structural-functionalist cannon which includes Parsons' theories of the changing role of the family from Classical China through Medieval Europe to the modern United States of Parsons' own time. It includes his explanation of his reservations about the idea of individualism as an aid to functionalist analysis.]
- 7 Sorkhabi, Nadia. 2005. "Applicability of Baumrind's Parent Typology to Collective Cultures: Analysis of Cultural Explanations of Parent Socialization Effects." *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 29(6):552–563. [This article discusses the effects of different child-rearing practices on child development. In the process, it tests some of the predictions of functionalist analysis against emerging evidence from modern Asia and finds them wanting.]
- 8 Teo, Youyenn. 2011. *Neoliberal Morality In Singapore: How Family Policies Make State And Society*. London: Routledge. [A work in the political economy framework by a leading Singaporean sociologist. Although not primarily concerned with education, this book lays out the approach which Teo draws upon in later articles. These include an update on her book given at the 2012 Meeting of the

International Sociological Association which is available online at: <http://www.isa-sociology.org/uploads/files/EBul-Teo-Jul2012.pdf>.]

- 9 Teo, Youyenn. 2017. "Singapore Sociology: After Meritocracy." *Global Dialogue* 7(1):21-2. [In this short article Teo shows how her work in the political economy framework can be developed to help us to understand the way parental influences on their children's education change. It takes as its theme the expansion of private enterprises offering parents opportunities to pay for education in shopping malls rather than schools.]

Useful links

The right to education

You can read all about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in its 1959 and 1989 iterations on the following websites. The first of them is the website for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. As well as reading the Convention itself, including Article 28 and other articles touching on the right to education, you can also read about the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child that monitors implementation of the Convention:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

The OHCHR includes a page celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Convention but the second website dates from the 25th anniversary in 2014. It consists of questions and answers about the Convention provided by Human Rights Watch. Elsewhere on their site you can find a range of video and other material on continued violations of children's rights around the world:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/17/25th-anniversary-convention-rights-child>

The three paradigms

The history of *neoinstitutionalism* is the subject of this talk by John Meyer. He carefully distinguishes a variety of institutionalisms including the theories he has formulated in collaboration with others within the broader neoinstitutional paradigm:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmqdZxr05IA>

Political geographer David Harvey has often served as the public face of the *political economy* paradigm, and particularly for the theory of neoliberalism. His website hosts a variety of material on political economy including this history of neoliberalism:

<http://davidharvey.org/2018/11/video-a-history-of-neoliberalism-with-david-harvey-interview-with-chris-hedges/>

The structural *functionalism* of Talcott Parsons remains an indispensable part of many foundation programmes in sociology. There is therefore no shortage of explanatory videos of his version of functionalism, including his theories of the family, on the web, for example on YouTube. It is pointless to single out any of these for special attention except to say that some of the most entertaining videos were produced by students.

The four countries

The discussion of the four countries – Singapore, Portugal, the UK and the US – which provided the qualitative data reported in the second half of our paper refers to some sources of comparative data for these countries. Three of the sources we mention have associated websites:

1. Geert Hofstede is a Dutch social psychologist. His website gives some background for the claims he and others make that Portugal and Singapore are amongst the least individualist societies while the United States and Britain are amongst the most individualist. The link below is to a page dedicated to the cultural dimension of individualism. It features a “Collectivism-Individualism World Map” and a video in which Hofstede explains what he thinks individualism means: <https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/>

2. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is run by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) which also hosts this website for all the PISA publications, including results for all the countries which participate in the programme (Singapore did not join until 2009). As well as datasets, the website also includes presentations about the work of the Programme at: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>. The webpage for the latest results is: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2018-results.htm>

3. The OECD website also contains a wealth of material which allows for the comparison of countries’ education systems (including the proportions of various age groups with tertiary education). The annual publication *Education at a Glance* is available for 1998 and every year 2000–2019. The OECD says:

“OECD’s annual *Education at a Glance* looks at who participates in education, what is spent on it, how education systems operate and the results achieved. The latter includes indicators on a wide range of outcomes, from comparisons of students’ performance in key subject areas to the impact of education on earnings and on adults’ chances of employment. This book includes StatLinks, urls linking to Excel® spreadsheets containing the background data.”

https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance_19991487

Focus questions

- 1 What is a paradigm?
- 2 Why has individualism interested theorists of education since Durkheim and Dewey?
- 3 Explain the different approaches taken by neoinstitutionalism, political economy and functionalism in each of the following key areas:
 - underlying changes in society of which educational expansion is an expression
 - the meaning and role of the notion of individualism
 - parental influences on children’s experiences of education (broadly defined)
- 4 What empirical findings does the article present?
- 5 What light do these findings shed on differences between the paradigms in their understanding of parental encouragement of individualism?

- 6 What does the article conclude about which paradigm is the most useful for explaining the underlying changes in society which have brought about educational expansion?

Seminar/Project idea

The article refers to the role of Charles Dickens in spreading the core beliefs of ‘sentimental individualism’ in the 19th century. Dickens’ novel, *Hard Times*, is available through Project Gutenberg. Read Chapter IX here:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/786/786-h/786-h.htm> - H

Which passage in this chapter do you think is most relevant to this argument and why?

[Teacher’s notes:

See, for example, the passage where Louisa Gradgrind approaches her old home with no recollection of the ‘dreams of childhood’ which are the source of ‘a great Charity in the heart . . . a garden in the stony ways of this world’. As a child she had not discovered ‘Reason through the tender light of Fancy . . . a beneficent god, deferring to gods as great as itself’ but had seen Reason as ‘a grim Idol, cruel and cold, with its victims bound hand to foot, and its big dumb shape set up with a sightless stare, never to be moved by anything but so many calculated tons of leverage’

To persuade parents to adopt an unconditional belief in the importance of their children’s imagination – ‘the tender light of Fancy’ – required decades of opinion-leading by novelists and politicians and agitators in the West.]